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Textual Regeneration and the Author's Progress

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This title may sound cryptic, actually it refers to one major change in Nabokov's life: his giving up of the Russian language for his writing when on the point of leaving Nazi Germany for a new asylum. "The author's progress" concerns both Nabokov's movement in space from the land of darkness to the land of light and his attempt at handling a new creative tool. "Textual regeneration" pertains to the rewriting of the English version of *Camera Obscura*¹ into *Laughter in the Dark*.²

The manuscript of *Laughter in the Dark* presents the curiosity of being a Nabokovian palimpsestic English version of an already existing English version. In other words, Nabokov reworked Winifred Roy's English text of his Russian novel not only because the translation was unsatisfactory, not only for the words and style, but also for more personal and compositional reasons as he described at the time in a letter written from Berlin to a New York literary agent, Altagracia de Jannelli:

I am not writing this in defence of my novels. They belong to Russia and her literature, and not only style but subject undergoes a horrible bleeding and distortion when translated into another tongue. (...) *Camera Obscura* which, in Russian, was meant as an elaborate parody, lies limp and lifeless in John Long's and Grasset's torture-houses; and *Despair* which is something more than an essay on the psychology of crime turns out to be a half-baked thriller — even when I translate it myself.³

If he decided to create in another tongue, he had to remake this foreign text his own to preserve it from distortion. To be brought to life again, the text needed revamping and had to be adapted to a new culture — there are different ways of saying the same things and the concept of communication cannot rest on meaning without considering the idea of content. This stylistic dualism is founded on the interrelation of sense (that is the basic, logical, conceptual, paraphrasable meaning) and significance (the total of what is communicated to the world by a given sentence or text).⁴ Therefore style and content cannot be separated and in the case of *Laughter in the Dark*, more particularly, the new words making the new sentences or simply the slight amendations are the result of a selection designed to appeal to the readers' understanding and their senses. And the author bears full responsibility in the creative or corrective act. Because imagination is at work, what is seen is also felt and heard, words being arranged along a new rhythmic line, significance is not to be severed from sense or senses if the work is to be perceived in its entirety, in black and white on paper but also in colour in the mind. Albert Albinus's blindness points out our need to develop a higher sensitivity to "coloured" hearing — which itself may represent our open-mindedness — if one wants to survive in a world which has become dead to our senses. One has to get ready for such transformations because when everything suddenly closes in around us, when one is locked within oneself, when the beacon of light is replaced by darkness, one has to find a way out through imagination. This is possible if the mind can feed on all the reserves heaped up by the senses over the years. Indeed, this might sum up the main difference between *Camera Obscura*, the 1934 English version of what was to become *Laughter in the Dark* at the end of 1937. The new title bears all the dramatic irony of those troubled times. Troubled politically, socially as well as personally for Nabokov. For all these reasons, I shall try and study how a

¹ *Camera Obscura*, London: John Long, 1938. All [page] references to this version will be given between [].

² *Laughter in the Dark*, London: Penguin, 1986. All (page) references to this version will be given between ().

³ Vladimir Nabokov, *Selected Letters*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989. Letter to Altagracia de Jannelli, November 16th, 1938?, p. 29.

⁴ Geoffrey N. Leech & Michael H. Short *Style in Fiction*. London: Longman, 1981, p.20-25.

link can be established between social, public, private or artistic life, and the novel in its new form.⁵

In terms of place and time, we cannot help noticing the overriding presence of Nazi Germany in the second English version, though most allusions are not historically specific. They can function on a multiple plane as criticisms of any form of totalitarianism. Nevertheless, the novel is firmly rooted in a particular era: in [*C.O.*, 7] the story takes place in Berlin in 1928, in (*L.D.*, 5) Berlin is mentioned, but there is no other reference than the slight political allusion to Margot's "father's tame republicanism" (*L.D.*, 16) already present in *C.O.*[20] — that is to the Weimar Republic. Moreover, "the war" is to be found in both versions, since Magda's father is said to be a "disabled soldier" [*C.O.*, 20], and more pointedly in *L.D.*, where he is a victim, physically and morally: he "had been badly shell-shocked in the war: [his grey head jerked unceasingly] as if in constant confirmation of grievance and woe" (15). We shift from a vague statement to specific historical details — the horrible wounds inflicted by modern warfare — enhanced by alliterations which draw the readers' attention to the sufferings a part of the population had to endure.

On the whole, this early reference to the war is representative of what follows: the Berlin of the twenties is not conspicuously present in the novel, aside from the film-making scenes and the animated life abroad. The atmosphere is heavy: the two books seem more to reflect the time of their composition [early thirties] and (late thirties) than the late twenties. In *L.D.* sentences are more jerky, with shorter propositions, juxtaposed with a minimum of conjunctions, so as to render a feeling of breathlessness in oppressive surroundings. Not only stylistically but also thematically, is the frightening violence of dictatorship lurking in the background of *L.D.*

Thus, the evolution from *C.O.* to *L.D.* is all the more relevant: a small number of very direct and obvious references can be found in *L.D.* when there is nothing in *C.O.* The beginning of (chapter 9) opens, "Berlin-West, a morning in May. Men in white caps cleaning the street. Who are the people who leave patent-leather boots in the gutter?" then the text turns to everyday platitudes to describe early morning activity whereas the above-mentioned sentence refers to some unnamed military night action, which no witness can describe, even in a novel, and soon to vanish in cleanliness and order. The presentation in the form of a question implies a shady and frightening side. Berlin, earlier regarded as a "depraved city" [*C.O.*, 26], underlining the decay of Weimar, or more simply the utter absence of any cultural or educational influence of all the creative movements of the twenties on the larger part of the population, has now become "wicked". Berlin is morally depraved and on top of that it can be destructive: it hints at the evil, harmful and vile turn it has taken.

What is supposed to be typically German is never positively presented, for instance when young Irma dies someone can be heard whistling four notes of Wagner's *Siegfried* (*L.D.*, 113). Or when Kaspar and Kurt, Otto's friends, are spelt with an initial K, adding to the alliteration an homographic dimension which enhances the violence of the two kids, these initials are also meant to remind Margot of the three "Ks" of her female duties in Nazi Germany: "Kinder, Kirche, Küche".

On the other hand, there are very positive elements which are so exaggerated as to become repulsive and to be derided. The cult of the Aryan sculptural body becomes what is obviously to be rejected altogether. On the beach, Magda in *C.O.* protects her body with «cream to prevent the sun from blistering her skin» [97]; Margot in *L.D.* wants "pounds of cream that help the sun to bronze her" (66). In perfect communion with nature, along with Nazi ideology, the choice of the verb makes a statue of her. Yet the best example is Axel Rex. In *C.O.*, Walter Horn is not the clean and neat symbol Axel Rex has become in *L.D.*: "He was stark naked

⁵ All biographical references come from Brian Boyd, *The Russian Years*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.

(...) his lean but robust body with, on his breast, black hair in the shape of a spread eagle, was tanned a deep brown (...) with his hairy legs crossed and his chin cupped in his hand (rather in the pose of Rodin's *Thinker*)" (177). The last part is an addition to the second version which does not even appear in the manuscript, and it literally makes a statue of him. Rex is gaining in ironic beauty and purity because in Nazi tradition, the male figure is standing, an expression of power. Here Rex is sitting, thus he is a mixture of Nazi art — his beautiful body recalling Arno Breker's statues,⁶ of the emblem of the old Reich taken up by the Nazis — with the eagle spread on his chest, and of Rodin's art. This last point emphasizes the paradox since Rodin distinguished himself as opposed to "official sculpture", as no respecter of convention, as an outsider who transposed feelings into form, just as Nabokov shapes the expression of the senses into words. This is where the demonstration leads, to finally conclude with: "(Rex was) watching how the man's thoughts were mirrored in his face as if that face had become one big eye since his actual pair of eyes had gone" (*L.D.*, 177). When connected to the previous description, the allusion to Rodin becomes more pregnant with meaning: Nazi art, the author seems to suggest, is meant to blind people. Albinus, the art expert, failed to understand how close Rex and Margot were. Margot whose beautiful body is described as "spread-eagled on the sand" (*L.D.*, 72) makes a perfect couple with Rex according to Nazi canon.

When *L.D.* was rewritten in English in the last four months of 1937, it found its place in between works denouncing tyranny, like *Invitation to a Beheading* (1934),⁷ "Cloud, Castle, Lake" (1936-1937),⁸ "Tyrants Destroyed" (1938),⁹ and fictitious biographies of writers like *The Gift* (1934-1938)¹⁰ — all of them composed in Russian — and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1938-1939),¹¹ Nabokov's first novel in English. In January 1937, Nabokov left Berlin forever, followed by Véra and Dmitri in April. *L.D.* is really a pivot in his life and art since it retains the thematic specificities of the works dealing with tyranny and it also opens on new perspectives since it is remodelled in another language, casting an ironic glance on serious topics like politics and creative writing. The author is a sort of tyrant, his characters and their behaviour totally depend on him, and they can acquire their freedom when they become aware of their belonging to another world, as Krug does at the end of *Bend Sinister*.¹² Nevertheless, the position of the writer faced with creation and political power is best exemplified in the conversation between Udo Conrad and Albert Albinus in chapter 28, a passage entirely restructured in theme and style. The political situation is indirectly referred to: "I didn't know you were in France," said Albinus. "I thought you usually dwelt in Mussolini's country." "Who is Mussolini?" asked Conrad with a puzzled frown" (*L.D.*, 138) and Conrad's answer is not meant to suggest that writers live in a closed world, in another type of darkness, but simply to show that fields of interest may vary; artists are as much concerned with political problems as any other person in life, they simply feel and express their worries differently. Thus in *L.D.*, once the topic — dictatorship — is settled, in order to do away with it, it has to be transformed from politics into creative writing: "Ah, you're always the same," laughed Albinus. "Don't get into a panic I'm not going to talk politics. Tell me about your work, please. Your last novel was superb." (*L.D.*, 138) Here the final link between political and intellectual life and the authorial progress from man to work, from experience to creation is established. The obvious insistence on the hardships of life which led to exile point to Nabokov's own preoccupations, expressed in Udo Conrad's words: "I'm afraid," said Udo,

⁶ For an extensive study of Nazi Art, see Peter Adam, *Art of the Third Reich*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992.

⁷ *Invitation to a Beheading*, New York: Vintage International, 1989.

⁸ "Cloud, Castle, Lake", in *Nabokov's Dozen*, London: Penguin, 1960.

⁹ "Tyrants Destroyed", in *Tyrants Destroyed*, London: Penguin, 1981.

¹⁰ *The Gift*, London: Penguin Books, 1988.

¹¹ *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, London: Penguin Books, 1964.

¹² *Bend Sinister*, New York: Vintage International, 1990.

“that our fatherland is not quite at the right level to appreciate my writings” (*L.D.*, 138) “Fatherland” applies not only to Conrad’s Germany or Nabokov’s asylum for a time, but also to Nabokov’s Russia. Exile is forced by circumstances, as already mentioned in chapter 18, in regard to Rex’s return to his native land when he was still in New York: “A rich spinster had been mixed up in (...) a rather one-sided conversation with certain authorities on the subject of undesirable aliens” (*L.D.*, 90). The author becomes more and more self-consciously involved in this platonic dialogue between Albinus and Conrad, intended to arouse the readers’ awareness to his own doubts: “I’d gladly write in French, but I’m loath to part with the experience and riches amassed in the course of my handling of our language.” (*L.D.*, 138) This second exile is going to take another dimension because of the sense of loss imposed by the change of mode of expression which has to be worked out without any nostalgia in order to prevent “style and subject” from undergoing “a horrible bleeding and distortion”. When Albinus wonders whether his friend might long for the sound of German voices, his tone may seem ironic once we dwell a little on the use of guttural and aggressive sounds in connection with the vulgar, violent voices of certain despicable German characters of the novel. Yet the reference to the sound of a language is also to be understood as the fundamental internal music which brings significance to the surface meaning of words, a subject all the more obsessive to Nabokov when he was completing his greatest Russian novel, *The Gift*, soon to be followed by his first English novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. His protagonists, authors themselves since they are biographers, are in quest of an author; there are two authors in one, the writing and the written, the author *of* the biography and the author *in* the biography, the first imprinting his character on the second. Fine cases of embedding are thus exemplified, less obviously though, in the rewriting process at work in *L.D.* since the reworking of a former theme depends on a strategy of rupture, resorted to by biographers and, of course, autobiographers.¹³ Essential matters build up after a deep breach, and those moments function as landmarks in the novel’s structure. Consequently all the alterations from *C.O.* to *L.D.* must be regarded as indicators of breaking points which correspond to a central preoccupation of the author. This is why there are not many of them, and they are very subtly developed, because of the high degree of personal implication: when Albert Albinus is musing over the fate of artists and their political commitment through the case of Udo Conrad who stands for the book itself, Nabokov is likely reflecting on his own fate and his book’s — an idea to be later expanded in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. Albinus is concerned with the plight of exiled artists, who live through various stages: “Like those creatures, you know, who first live in an aquatic state and then on dry land” (*L.D.*, 140). Through Albinus’s comments on the story of an exiled writer, Vladimir Nabokov writes himself into his own book. Furthermore, Albinus, the art expert of *L.D.*, is the author of the biography of another Sebastian: “I happened to read on the boat your excellent biography of Sebastiano del Piombo” (*L.D.*, 84). An intimacy between the man of fiction and the book itself is progressively established: “she seemed to him an exquisitely coloured vignette heading the first chapter of his new life” [*C.O.*, 107] (*L.D.*, 73).

Here we reach a more private stage in the relation between the author and his work. Jane Grayson¹⁴ observed that most reworkings tend to a “toning down of the erotic content of the novel”. Altogether this “toning down” does not correspond to a disappearance of eroticism but rather to a different perception, hence, rendering of sexuality and love-relations in *L.D.* The characters are no longer prompted by “animal” urges, the appeal is no longer physical, like Horn who is said to be “irresistible” [*C.O.*, 30] when Rex becomes “satisfying” (*L.D.*, 23) as if a process of moral improvement were at work. Nonetheless the animal is present in the

¹³ Voir *Autobiographie et Biographie: Colloque de Heidelberg*. Paris: Librairie A.G. Nizet, 1989.

¹⁴ Jane Grayson, *Nabokov Translated. A Comparison of Nabokov's Russian and English Prose*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, p.29.

repeated “s” for hissing, sin and death from the beginning of her relationship with Rex: “he kissed her ear (...) The kiss sang in her ear” (*L.D.*, 24) Generally speaking the evolution is from the explicit to the implicit, from the crude detail to an attempt to mitigate the text in a personal operation of purification: Magdalene redeemed.

When Nabokov set about rewriting *Camera Obscura* he had just seen Irina Guadanini for the last time. Now that the affair was over, it had to be exorcised. It could not be obliterated, but rather used in his work in order to be sublimated and become an incident in his life. The occasion might have been seized to settle a score with his former lover, in so doing the writer would have imprinted his own condemnation and would not be relieved of his burden. All the loathsome actions Magda undertakes, Margot also attempts, but her environment, both human and mental, is less perverted; rather, she is victimized: sordid and disgusting details that point to Magda’s bitchery vanish with Margot. In most sentences she is less personally involved, as if she acted under another’s influence. Technically, this is the result of the passage from an omniscient and direct definition of the character and her doings to indirect presentation through the remarks of an outer observer retelling the successive scenes which are also more metaphorically developed or less descriptive. On the whole tendentious details involving Kretschmar and Magda, such as: “suddenly he was conscious of a delicious tremor beneath his hand as she raised her hip slightly” [*C.O.*, 55] are deleted when it comes to the Albinus-Margot liaison: “She crossed her feet and rocked gently as she stood there, her eyes roaming” (*L.D.*, 39). In *C.O.*, which focuses on desire, the situation centers on both the object of desire and its outcome, whereas the heart of the matter in *L.D.* is transferred to the life of fictitious beings who are affected by their senses and the way they perceive things, so that from the very beginning Albinus’s fate is foreshadowed. Unlike Bruno Kretschmar, who was the helpless victim of his desire and no longer able to decide because, as in the taxi scene, he was “intoxicated”, Albert Albinus’s perceptive faculties are excessively developed. All his decisions are taken deliberately, thus this new character has to be understood as responsible for his acts.

Moreover, the Albinus-Margot relationship is often regarded as a prototype of the Humbert-Lolita relationship. It is true however that *L.D.* is far less complex and accomplished in terms of plot, structure, composition or writing for the comparison to be valid beyond a few details which are taken up in *Lolita*, like the gipsy figure (*L.D.*, 58, 113), or the following echo of the Rita scene:¹⁵ Albinus and Margot are in a bar and Margot’s cheek is “burning” because she has drunk a little too much: “the lips glistening with cherry brandy” (*L.D.*, 32) ; Humbert meets Rita who is “amiably drunk” in a “burning bar”. The *C.O.* version: “He tried to take her hand, but she would not allow this” [43] is transformed in *L.D.* into: “He pawed at her little hand, but she withdrew it quickly” (32) which recalls *Lolita*’s “she placed her trembling little hand on my ape paw.” These examples do not attempt to draw any similarity between the two novels but may help us understand that *L.D.* can certainly be considered as a stepping stone in Nabokov’s English career.

Thanks to his multicultural education, Vladimir Nabokov was able to create in several languages when history prompted him to do so. Unlike his characters, he did not wait until being blinded to avoid becoming the passive victim of his amputated senses. He decided soon enough to conjure up a new mode of expression in order to adapt the creative act to another linguistic system in another cultural environment. This is probably why the political and social environment at the time of the second writing of the novel comes to the fore in *L.D.*, casting authorial experience and voice in the same mould so as to enable the author to reach the Celestial City of creation, the place of polychromic and polysemic performance, his Babel.

¹⁵ *Lolita*, London: Corgi, 1967: II, chapter 26, page 272.